FORUM

Helping School Kids Reach Nutritional Excellence

This month schools nationwide observe National School Lunch Week—making now a good time to discuss how behind-the-scenes efforts of ARS researchers support USDA school-meal programs.

ARS National Human Nutrition Program scientists study nutrition's role in human health from early childhood to advanced old age. Their research findings are used to develop sound dietary recommendations for the American public, including effective food assistance programs. This research is carried out at six ARS human nutrition research centers and several other locations throughout the United States. Two of these centers, one in Little Rock, Arkansas, and one in Houston, Texas, focus on child nutrition. The center in Beltsville, Maryland, provides unique national resources that support adult and child nutrition researchers in both public and private sectors.

Defining nutrient requirements across the life cycle is an important component of ARS human nutrition research. These findings provide a critical research base for the national dietary standards known as the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The DRIs, developed by the National Academies' Institute of Medicine under a charter granted by Congress, are the accepted source on nutrient needs to maintain health. The science-based Dietary Guidelines, on the other hand, translate these nutrient needs into information that can be used by the American public for choosing a nutritious diet and maintaining a healthy weight. These two standards are the nation's primary sources of nutrition guidance for the USDA food assistance programs.

Another important function of the ARS Human Nutrition Program is cooperating with the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which administers the federal nutrition assistance programs. ARS has a unique history of supporting FNS. The staff at the ARS Beltsville Human Nutrition Research Center's Nutrient Data Laboratory produces and maintains the premier national nutrient database of more than 7,000 food items, called the National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, or SR18. Eleven years ago, the ARS Standard Reference Database was used as the basis for creating the first Child Nutrition Database, which offers nutrient information on foods that are commonly served under USDA child nutrition programs. At that time, it helped kick off the use of computers for measuring the nutritional value of federally reimbursable school meals, which are subject to stringent nutritional requirements.

To this day, FNS's Child Nutrition Database is updated yearly with nutrient values from the annually released ARS Standard Reference Database.

ARS and FNS also team up to evaluate software programs for calculating the nutritional value of meals served under the USDA National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. The process for evaluating these nutrient-based software programs rests with the ARS National Agricultural Library's Healthy School Meals Resource System. This system is one of NAL's many free, Internet-oriented resources for consumers and professionals. (See story on page 4.)

Schools must use a USDA-approved software program to analyze the nutrient content of USDA-administered school meals. Staff at the Healthy School Meals Resource System evaluate candidate software programs to be sure that the software correctly incorporates the Child Nutrition Database and accurately analyzes the nutrient content of meals.

But while computers are now helping school foodservice workers ensure that the meals offered in schools comply with nutrition standards, it is another challenge altogether to ensure that students consume the nutritious foods provided.

Legislation enacted by the U.S. Congress requires USDA to survey and analyze the food consumption habits of Americans on a regular basis. To accomplish this, the ARS Food Surveys Research Group (FSRG) coordinates the national dietary intake survey called "What We Eat in America" through a successful partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Underlying that effort, FSRG developed a highly effective, automated dietary intake survey instrument to collect food consumption information. Last year, FSRG provided FNS with the automated survey instrument to use with all ages of school-children to discern the various foods they eat in schools. FSRG also began providing technical assistance to FNS for its School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study III. This FNS study aims to determine—based on actual food intake data—whether students are benefiting from the stringent nutrient requirements for meals served within USDA's school meal programs.

All these efforts come at a time when consumers are gaining greater access to authoritative, healthful nutrition information via the Internet. New this year, the ARS National Agricultural Library launched www.nutrition.gov, an easy-to-use website for consumers and professionals. Using the search feature at the top left of the home page, type in HSMRS, for the Healthy School Meals Resource System, or go down one box to "Browse by audience" and click on "Information for . . . kids and teens."

Once you're there, you'll find a bounty of quality nutrition information for yourself and your family—and for helping the nation's school kids reach nutritional excellence.

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